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Spotlight on Canadians: Results from the General Social Survey

Civic engagement and political participation in Canada

by Martin Turcotte

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... not applicable
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0^s value rounded to 0 (zero) where there is a meaningful distinction between true zero and the value that was rounded
^{p} preliminary
^{r} revised
x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*
^{E} use with caution
F too unreliable to be published
* significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

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Highlights

Civic engagement

- In 2013 nearly two in three Canadians were members or participants in a group, organization or association (65%), up slightly from 2003 (61%).
- From 2003 to 2013, the increase in the rate of participation in groups was twice as high for women (up 6 percentage points) as for men (up 3 percentage points).
- The level of civic engagement varied by province. In 2013, 58% of Quebeckers were members or participants in a group, compared with 66% of Ontarians and 73% of British Columbians.
- In 2013, 78% of university degree holders were members or participants in a group, compared with 41% of those without a high school diploma.
- Among people aged 25 to 64 years, 59% of recent immigrants were participants in a group, compared with 63% of established immigrants and 67% of non-immigrants.
- The three types of groups in which Canadians were the most likely to participate were sports or recreational organizations (31%), unions or professional associations (28%), and cultural, educational or hobby organizations (20%).
- While 7% of those aged 25 to 64 years whose personal income was $80,000 or more were members of or participants in a political party or group, this was true of 3% of those whose personal income was less than $40,000.

Political participation

- In 2013 the proportion of those aged 25 to 34 years who reported having voted in the last federal election was 70%, compared with 92% of seniors aged 75 years and over.
- Among those aged 25 to 34 years, voter turnout in the 2011 federal election ranged from 55% among those with a high school diploma to 81% among those with a university degree. The corresponding rates among seniors aged 65 to 74 years were 92% and 95%.
- Among those who had not voted in the last federal election, 14% of young adults aged 25 to 34 years reported that the main reason was that they were not informed on the issues. By comparison, the proportion was 3% among those aged 55 years and over.
- In 2013, 21% of those with a university degree took part in a public meeting, compared with 12% of those with a high school diploma and 9% of those without a high school diploma.
- In 2013, 71% of respondents who had no confidence in the Canadian media reported having voted in the last election, compared with 81% of those having a higher level of confidence in the Canadian media.

Civic engagement and political participation in Canada

By Martin Turcotte

The level of political participation or civic engagement is sometimes used to assess how healthy a democracy is. According to some political scientists, the higher the number of citizens who participate and the more varied their backgrounds, the greater the likelihood that the principle of equality—essential in a democracy—will be respected (Verba 1996).

In Canada, freedom of association, free speech and the right to participate in the political process are guaranteed by law. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* explicitly recognizes four fundamental freedoms: (a) freedom of conscience and religion; (b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication; (c) freedom of peaceful assembly; and (d) freedom of association. Furthermore, under section 3 of the *Charter*, "every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election of members of the House of Commons or of a legislative assembly and to be qualified for membership therein."

To what extent do Canadians make use of and take advantage of those freedoms, either by participating in some kind of group, by voting in elections or by expressing their views on various political issues?

The first section of this report presents the most recent findings on the participation of Canadians 15 years and older in groups, organizations and associations. The focus is on the types of groups that people participate in and how often they participate.

The second section looks at the prevalence of the various forms of political participation: voting, volunteering for a political party, boycotting or choosing a particular product for ethical reasons, and signing petitions. The data are from the 2013 General Social Survey (GSS) on Social Identity and, for the purposes of comparison over time, from the 2003 and 2008 GSS.

Section 1: Civic engagement

The percentage of Canadians who are members of a group, organization or association is rising

People become members of and participate in groups or organizations for different reasons: to cultivate new relationships, to make themselves useful or contribute to social progress, or to participate in a sport or an artistic activity. Sometimes, as in the case of unions, people can become members of a group without necessarily taking any steps to do so. Regardless of the reason, civic engagement is perceived as positive, both for participants and for the community (Curtis, Baer and Grabb 2001; Claibourn and Martin 2007).

As part of the GSS, information was collected on a variety of groups, organizations and associations that Canadians are members of. Such organizations, which may or may not have a formal structure, consist of groups of people who get together regularly to participate in an activity or to discuss various issues.

In 2013, nearly two in three Canadians were members or participants in a group, organization or association (65%). This proportion was the same as that recorded in 2008, but was slightly higher than in 2003 (61%) (Table 1).

From 2003 to 2013, the increase in the rate of participation in groups was twice as high for women (up 6 percentage points) as for men (an increase of 3 percentage points). As a result, women were just as likely as men to be members of a group in 2013, while they were less likely in 2003 (Table 1).

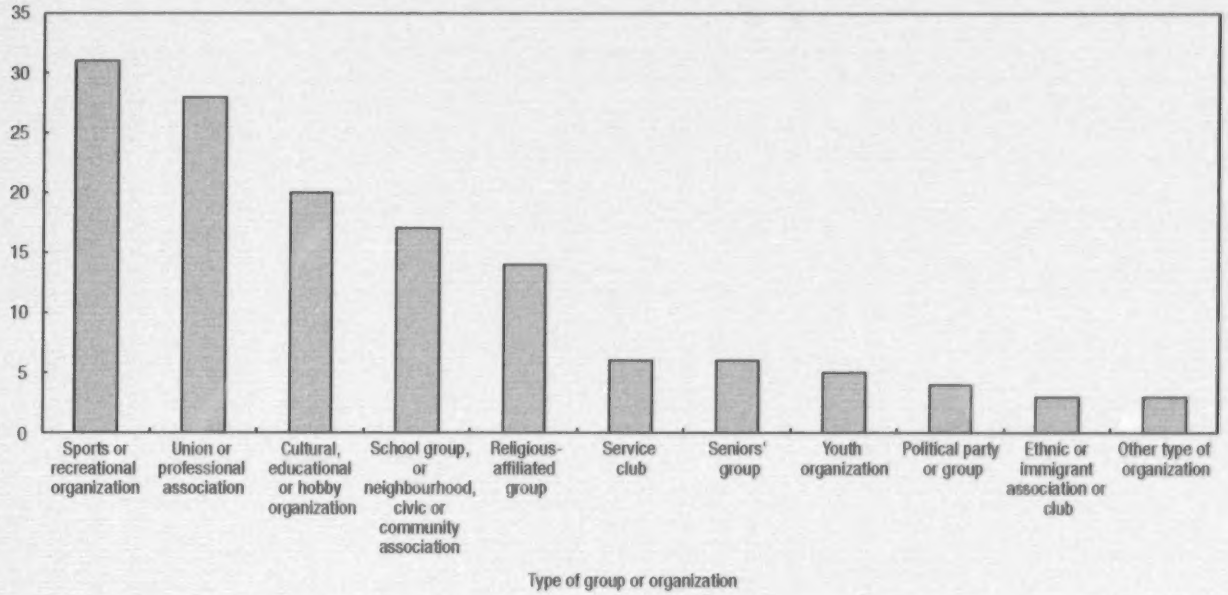
With regard to the different age groups, the increase in civic engagement was especially pronounced for older Canadians. The proportion of seniors aged 75 and over who were members or participants was up 14 percentage

points between 2003 and 2013, from 45% to 59%. This growth could possibly be attributed, at least in part, to better health on the part of older seniors.[1]

Sports and recreational organizations are the most popular with Canadians

In 2013, the three types of groups that Canadians were most likely to participate in were sports or recreational organizations (31%), unions or professional associations (28%) and cultural, educational or hobby organizations (20%) (Chart 1). In comparison, only 4% of people aged 15 and over were members of a political party or group and 3% of an ethnic or immigrant association or club.[2]

Chart 1
People who were members or participants in a group, organization or association, by type of group or organization, 2013



Source: Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey.

The popularity of different types of groups did not increase at the same pace during the period (Tables 1, 2 and 3). Those that posted a slight increase in participation include unions or professional associations (from 25% to 28%), sports or recreational organizations (from 29% to 31%) and cultural, educational or hobby organizations (from 18% to 20%).

In all three cases, the increase in the rate of engagement for women was the source of the growth. For example, the proportion of men who were members of a union or professional association remained unchanged from 2003 to 2013. For women, it rose from 22% to 27% during the period.

However, decreases in participation rates were recorded for religious-affiliated groups (from 17% to 14%)[3] and service clubs (from 8% to 6%) (Table 3).

1. In 2013, the proportion of seniors 75 years and older who reported being in excellent or very good health was 42% compared with 34% in 2003.
2. However, 8% of immigrants were members of an ethnic or immigrant association or club.
3. During the period, there was a decrease in the proportion of those who reported that their religious or spiritual beliefs were important in the way they lived their lives (65% in 2013 compared with 71% in 2003).

In the case of service clubs, the decrease was especially pronounced for men 65 and older: 15% of men were members of such clubs in 2013 compared with 21% in 2003.

Stages of the life course and civic engagement

The popularity of various types of groups varies by age, reflecting the different stages of the life course, but possibly generational differences as well.

In 2013 as well as previously, young people (between 15 and 24 years) were particularly drawn to sports organizations and school or community groups.

Reflecting their participation in the labour force, adults aged 25 to 64 were most likely to belong to a union or professional association—reaching a high of 37% among those aged 35 to 44 in 2013.

Seniors were most likely to be part of religious-affiliated groups or service clubs (e.g., the Kiwanis Club, the Knights of Columbus or the Legion). In 2013, the participation rate of seniors aged 75 and older (11%) in service clubs was nearly three times higher than that of people aged 25 to 34 (4%) (Table 3).

In addition to the differences observed between the youngest and oldest age groups, changes in preferences among the various groups were also observed during the period. Furthermore, cultural, educational or hobby organizations (such as theatre groups, book clubs and bridge clubs), which were already popular among young people aged 15 to 24, have become even more so; the participation rate of youth rose from 19% in 2003 to 26% in 2013. This increase may be associated with the rising popularity of virtual communities of online players among youth.

Adults aged 25 to 64 were less inclined to be involved with religious-affiliated organizations. The decline in membership in religious groups could be observed in particular among those aged 55 to 64 (in 2013, members of the baby boom generation). In that age group, the proportion of people who were members of a religious-affiliated organization fell from 20% in 2003 to 15% in 2013.

Among seniors, in particular those aged 75 and older, participation in sports or recreational organizations, as well as in cultural, educational or hobby organizations, increased more significantly. These trends may reflect a greater propensity for an active retirement, made possible by better health.[4]

These changes in the groups and organizations that the various cohorts of Canadians choose to participate in, as well as the aging of the population, have an impact on the demographic profile of members of such groups.

In 2003, seniors aged 65 and over represented 20% of members of religious-affiliated groups, a proportion that increased to 25% in 2013.

Moreover, the percentage of members of a political party or group who were aged 65 and older rose from 18% in 2003 to 29% in 2013. This age profile may influence the types of activities of such groups, and possibly even the various topics the members discuss.

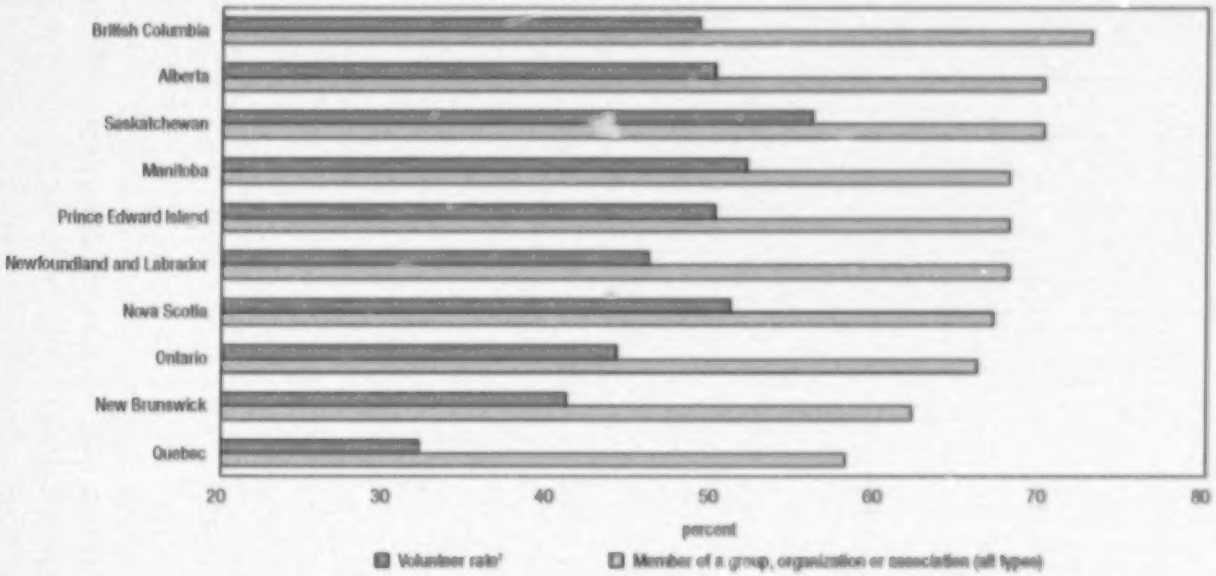
4. Studies have shown that participating in social activities could also have significant advantages for seniors, notably in terms of staying in good physical and mental health (see Gilmour 2012).

Regional differences in civic engagement are observed

The level of civic engagement varied significantly by province. In 2013, 58% of Quebeckers were members or participants in a group or organization, compared with 66% of Ontarians and 73% of British Columbians.

These regional variations in the rate of participation in groups can shed some light on those that pertain to the volunteer rate. There is in fact a degree of association (albeit not perfect) between the percentage of people who were members of a group, organization or association and the volunteer rate recorded in a particular province (Chart 2). Although this is not the only factor, residents of certain provinces may have been less likely to volunteer simply because they were less inclined to be members or participants in a group or organization.

Chart 2
Civic engagement rate and volunteer rate, by province, 2013



1. The data on volunteer rates are taken from the 2013 General Social Survey – Giving, Volunteering and Participating.
Sources: Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey and 2013 General Social Survey – Giving, Volunteering and Participating.

Civic engagement is higher among people with a higher level of education

Although, in principle, participation in groups and organizations is free and open to everyone, there were still differences in participation among people who were members of different socioeconomic groups.

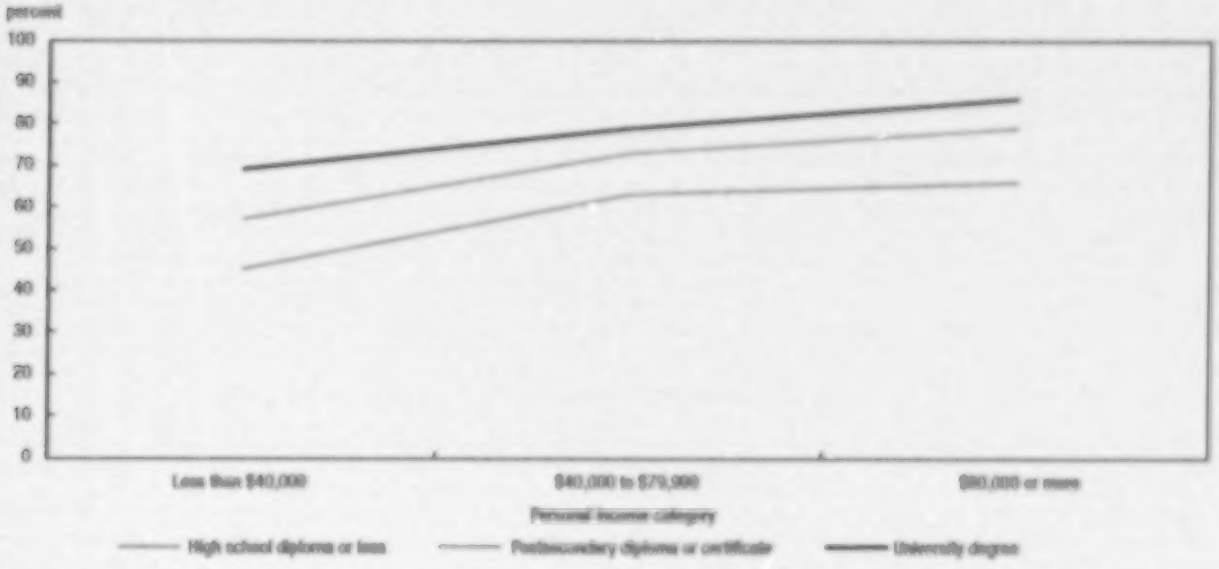
According to the 2013 GSS, people who had a higher level of education were much more likely to be civically engaged. In 2013, 78% of those with a university degree aged 25 to 64 years were members or participants of a group, compared to 56% of those with a high school diploma and 41% of those without a high school diploma.

Among people aged 25 to 64, personal income was also positively associated with participation in groups: 81% of respondents with a personal income of $80,000 or over per year were members or participants in a group, compared with 56% of those whose personal income was less than $40,000 per year (Table 4).

However, the fact that those with a higher level of education had higher incomes was not the only explanation for the association between personal income and civic engagement (Chart 4). For each category of personal income, the probability of being a member or participant in a group increased with the highest level of education attained. However, if the level of education remained constant, the participation rate also increased with personal income.

For example, among university graduates aged 25 to 64, the participation rate rose from 69% for those whose personal income was under $40,000 to 86% for those earning $80,000 or over[5] (Chart 3).

Chart 3
People aged 25 to 64 who were members or participants in a group, organization or association, by level of education and personal income, 2013



Source: Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey.

People with higher incomes were more likely to be members of a political party or group

The impact of education level on civic engagement varied depending on the type of organization. Reflecting the type of employment they held, university graduates (49%) were four times more likely to be members of a union or professional association than those without a high school diploma (12%).

Personal income also played a role. While 7% of people aged 25 to 64 whose personal income was $80,000 or over were members or participants in a political party or group, this was the case for 3% of those whose personal income was under $40,000 (Table 4). Viewed from a different angle, 34% of members of a political party or group had a personal income of $80,000 or over, compared with 20% of those who were not part of such a group.[6]

Participation in a sports or recreational organization, which can entail financial costs, was also strongly associated with socioeconomic status. Among people aged 25 to 64, those whose personal income was $80,000 or over (46%) were approximately twice as likely to be members of a sports or recreational organization as those whose income was less than $40,000 (22%).

5. This difference could partly be explained by the fact that university graduates with higher incomes were more likely to be part of a union or professional association. However, this higher rate of unionization does not explain everything, and the relationship existed for other types of groups as well. For example, among university graduates, those with higher incomes were more likely to be part of a sports or recreational organization.
6. These proportions are for people aged 25 to 64. Respondents who did not provide information concerning their personal income are not included in these estimates.

However, these socioeconomic characteristics were less strongly associated with participation in a religious-affiliated group or service club.

Civic engagement is lower among recent immigrants

Immigrants are less inclined than non-immigrants to volunteer for a group or organization (Thomas, 2012). They are also less likely to be members of a group, organization or association. In 2013, among the 25-to-64 age group, 59% of recent immigrants were members or participants in a group, compared with 63% of established immigrants and 67% of non-immigrants[7] (Table 4).

The differences between immigrants and non-immigrants were especially pronounced with regard to participation in sports and recreational organizations (19% of recent immigrants participated in such organizations compared with 33% of non-immigrants).

While 36% of non-immigrants were members of a union or professional association, this was the case for 30% of established immigrants and 28% of recent immigrants. Among university graduates, the differences were even more substantial: 55% of non-immigrants were members of a union or professional association, compared with 41% of established immigrants and 32% of recent immigrants. These variations may reflect the difficulties that university-educated immigrants experience in the labour market, such as the fact that they are less likely to be employed in professional occupations (Uppal and Larochelle-Côté 2014).

However, the variances in participation between immigrants and non-immigrants were different in the case of religious-affiliated groups: approximately one in five immigrants was a member of this type of group, compared with one in ten non-immigrants. Immigrants were also more likely than non-immigrants to volunteer and donate to religious organizations (Thomas 2012).

One reason for these differences could be the fact that immigrants attach more importance to religion in their lives. In 2013, 77% of immigrants reported that their religious or spiritual beliefs played a very important role in the way they lived their lives, compared with 62% of non-immigrants. Moreover, 26% of immigrants participated in religious activities or attended religious services or meetings on a weekly basis, compared with 14% of non-immigrants.

Groups and organizations that Canadians are most involved with

Participants may be members of more than one group but devote most of their time and energy to one of them. In the 2013 GSS, respondents were asked to indicate the organization they had been most involved with during the year—in other words, their main organization.

Not surprisingly, seniors and younger Canadians did not tend to report the same types of organizations. While a greater proportion of seniors aged 65 and over were mainly involved with religious-affiliated groups (20%) or seniors' groups (19%), people aged 64 and under were more likely to be mainly involved in sports and recreational organizations (33%) (Table 5).

People had been members of their main organizations for an average of 10 years. Loyalty to the group was generally higher among members of service clubs and religious-affiliated groups (18 years of participation on average). The fact that members of this type of group were older partly explains this finding.

Conversely, the members involved for the shortest length of time were those whose main organization was a school group or a neighbourhood, civic or community association (six years of participation). Participation in school groups is generally temporary and ends when involvement with the school system ends. Civic or community associations may be created and dissolved when a specific cause that affects a neighbourhood arises: when there is opposition to the construction of a new building, for example.

7. Recent immigrants are those who immigrated between 2000 and 2013, while established immigrants immigrated before 2000.

Frequency of participation in group activities

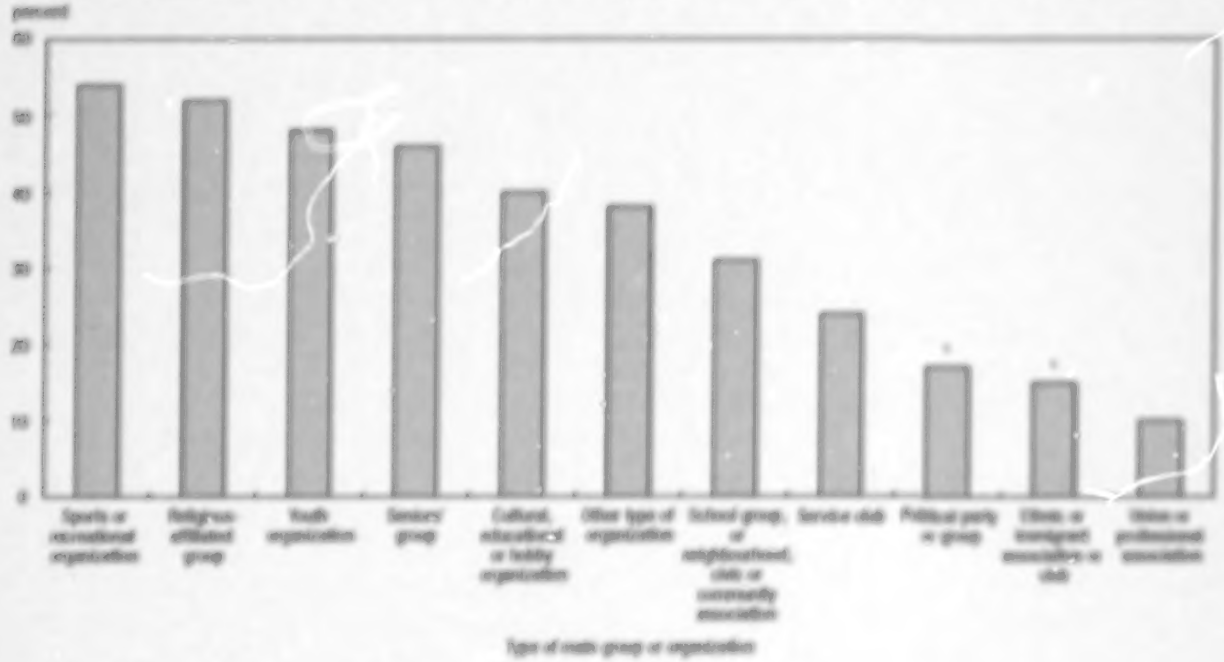
Being a member of a particular group, even for a number of years, does not necessarily mean highly active participation. The benefits associated with civic engagement are undoubtedly not of the same nature or magnitude for everyone, depending on the frequency of participation.

In 2013, 73% of participants had taken part in the activities of the various groups they were part of at least once a month. This frequency of participation varied depending on the participant's main organization, i.e., the group the participant was most involved with during the year.

People whose main organization was a union or professional association were least likely to participate in group activities at least once a month (36%). In comparison, this was the case for 87% of people whose main organization was a religious-affiliated group and for 84% of those for whom it was a sports or recreational organization.

The differences between the types of groups were even more pronounced with regard to weekly participation (Chart 4). For example, 54% of members of a sports organization stated that they had taken part in group activities or meetings every week, compared with 10% of members or participants in a union or professional association.

Chart 4
Weekly participation in group activities or meetings, by type of group or organization participants were most involved with, 2013



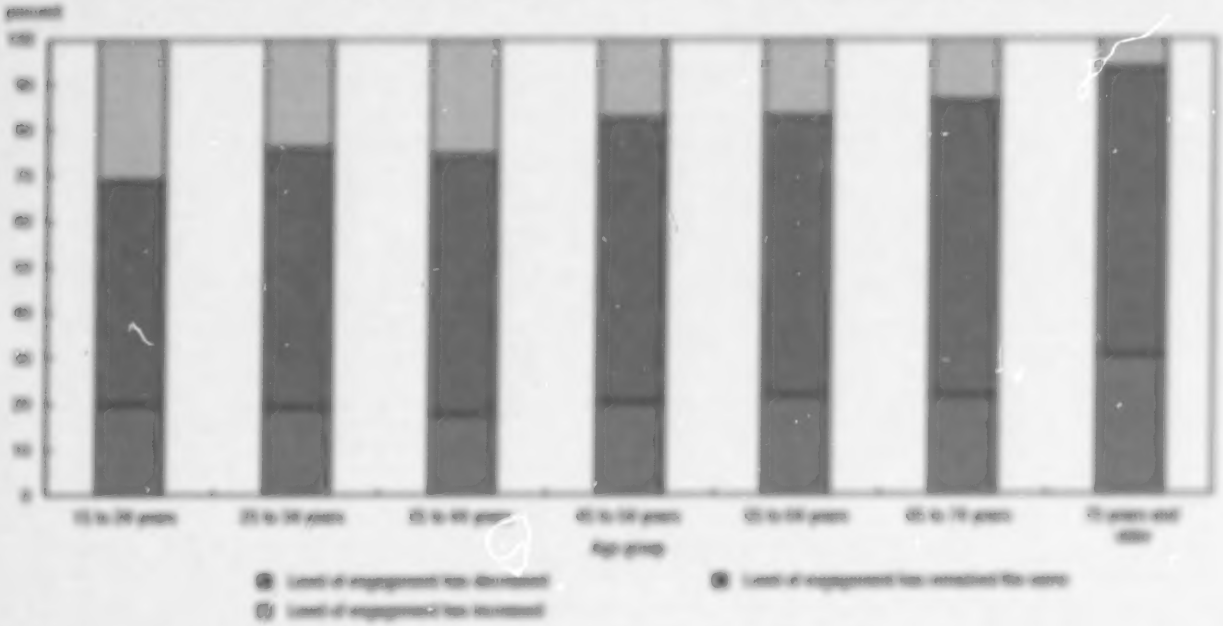
E use with caution
Source: Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey

The level of engagement of most members or participants was similar to what it was five years earlier

As part of the GSS, respondents were also asked whether their level of engagement had increased or decreased or stayed the same over the previous five years. In response to this question, most people reported that their level of engagement was the same (59% in 2013). The proportion of respondents whose level of engagement had decreased and that of people whose level had increased over the previous five years were the same (21%). Those proportions remained at similar levels between 2065 and 2013.

People use their time differently during the different stages of the life course, a fact that may have an impact on patterns and types of civic engagement. In general, the trend towards a more intense level of engagement decreased by age group (Chart 5). More specifically, 31% of young Canadians (aged 15 to 24) had seen their level of engagement with organizations increase over the previous five years, compared with 6% of seniors aged 75 and older.

Chart 5
Change in level of engagement with groups and organizations compared with five years earlier, by age group, 2013



Source: Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey

A good number of older people maintained their involvement, since nearly two in three seniors had retained the same level of engagement compared with what it was five years earlier (64% for those aged 65 to 74 and 63% for people aged 75 and older).

Internet use in the context of civic engagement

The ways of being involved with groups have changed considerably over the past decade. For example, a growing proportion of members (44%) had been active by using the Internet in 2013, compared with 23% in 2065.

The participants most likely to use the Internet for their activities were those whose main organization was a political party or group (53%) or a cultural, educational or hobby organization (53%).

Conversely, those whose main organization was a religious-affiliated group (51%) or a seniors' group (15%) were less apt to use it. These lower proportions reflect the stronger presence of seniors in these types of groups. Seniors aged 65 and over were nearly two times less likely than people aged 15 to 64 to be involved by using the Internet in 2013 (L.16 and 47% respectively).

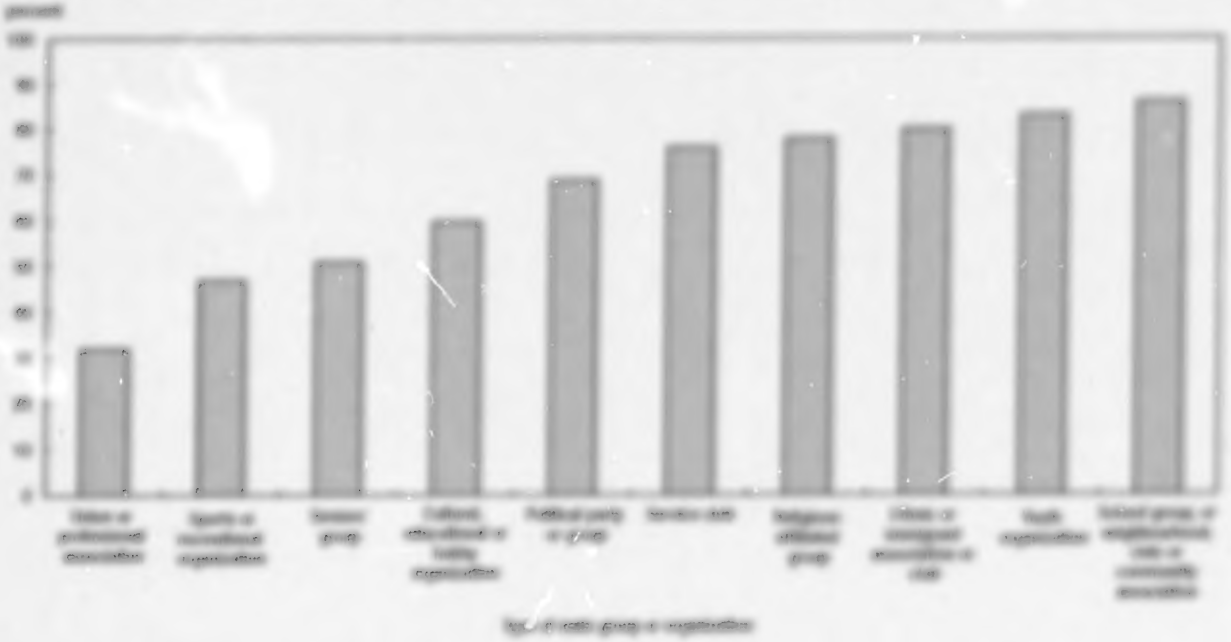
Participants used the Internet in different ways in connection with their engagement. In 2013, the most frequent types of use were email, blogs, forums or social networks (58%), sharing knowledge and information (58%) and organizing and scheduling activities (53%).

Volunteering with the main organization

Being a member or participant in a group often involves volunteer activities on its behalf. In 2013, more than half of members or participants in a group (57%) stated that their involvement with the organization for which they were most active primarily took the form of volunteering.

The mission of the groups and the objectives of the people who decide to take part in them can vary widely. Moreover, the level of participants' volunteer engagement differs greatly depending on the type of organization. In 2013, people who were mainly involved with school groups or neighbourhood, civic or community associations were those most likely to have reported that their main form of involvement was volunteering (86%) (Chart 6).

Chart 6
People whose involvement with main organization consisted mainly of volunteering, 2013



Source: Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey.

The two types of groups that were most popular with Canadians, i.e., unions or professional associations as well as sports or recreational organizations, were also the two for which the lowest proportions of members had reported volunteering as their main form of involvement (Chart 6).

Civic engagement and social networks[2]

The relationship between the size and the type of respondents' networks and respondents' participation in groups and organizations are complex. People who have many friends or acquaintances are more likely to be asked to be part of a new group than those who have fewer relationships. However, the very fact of participating in group activities can be conducive to the development of more extended social networks.

According to the GSS results, the proportion of respondents who reported having more than 10 friends or acquaintances was 71% for those who took part in group activities or meetings at least once a month, compared with 58% of those who had participated less often and 40% of those who never participated in such activities.

In addition, 57% of people who participated monthly in group activities had met, within the past month, at least one new person they intended to remain in contact with. In comparison, this was the case for 43% of respondents who participated less frequently in group activities and 36% of those who never took part in them.

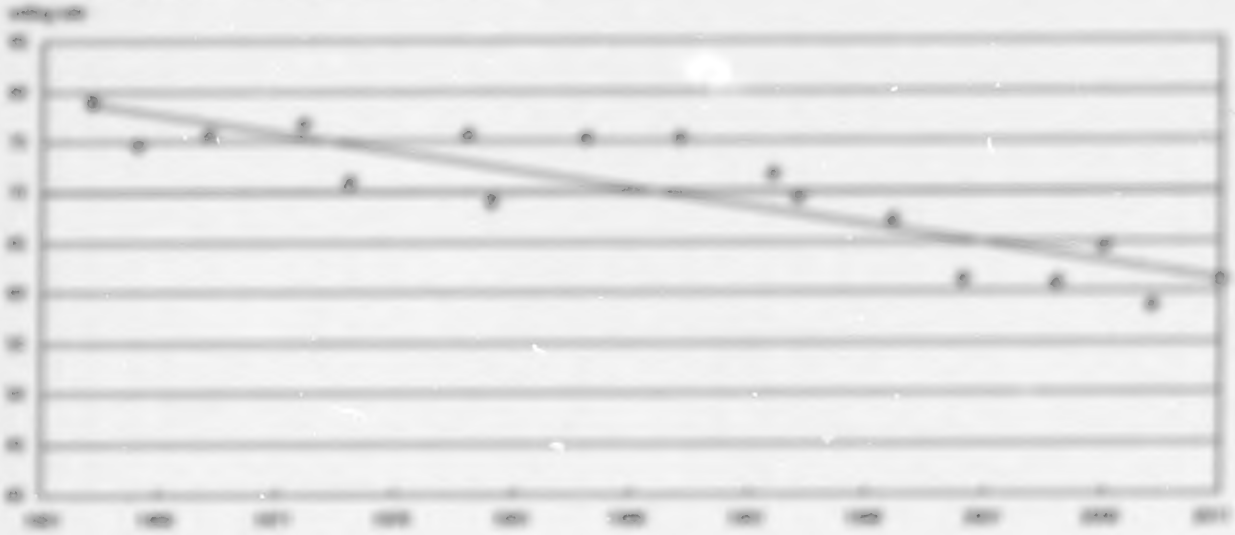
Section 2: Political participation of Canadians

Political participation: Who votes?

In liberal democracies such as Canada, one of the fundamental rights granted to all citizens is that of choosing their representatives in free and fair elections.

The most common political act in the population is by far voting. However, there has been an overall decline in voting in the past 50 years, despite a number of blips over the years (Chart 1). More specifically, the voting rate fell from 79% for the 1963 federal election to 61% for the last election in 2011. An all-time low of 58.8% was recorded in 2008.

Chart 1
Official voter turnout in federal elections, 1963 to 2011



Source: Elections Canada.

2. For more information about the characteristics of social networks associated with civic engagement, please see the publication: Portrait of social capital in Canada (Statistics 2010).

It is recognized that voter turnout rates, as measured in surveys, tend to be overestimated when compared with official rates (Uppal and LaRochelle-Côté 2012). This was also the case in the 2013 GSS: among the people eligible to vote in the last federal election, 81% reported having voted. Despite this overestimation of voting rates, the factors associated with voting were similar to those observed in other studies.

Among eligible voters 25 years and older, the lower voting rates were observed for the 25-to-34 age group, people with lower levels of education, recent immigrants, parents with children under the age of 5 and Aboriginal people.[9]

Conversely, the people most likely to have voted were seniors, university graduates, people whose personal income was higher and who were homeowners, and people who were married or in a common-law union (Table 6).

From a regional point of view, voter turnout was highest in Quebec, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. However, there was little variation in the voting rate in the other provinces.

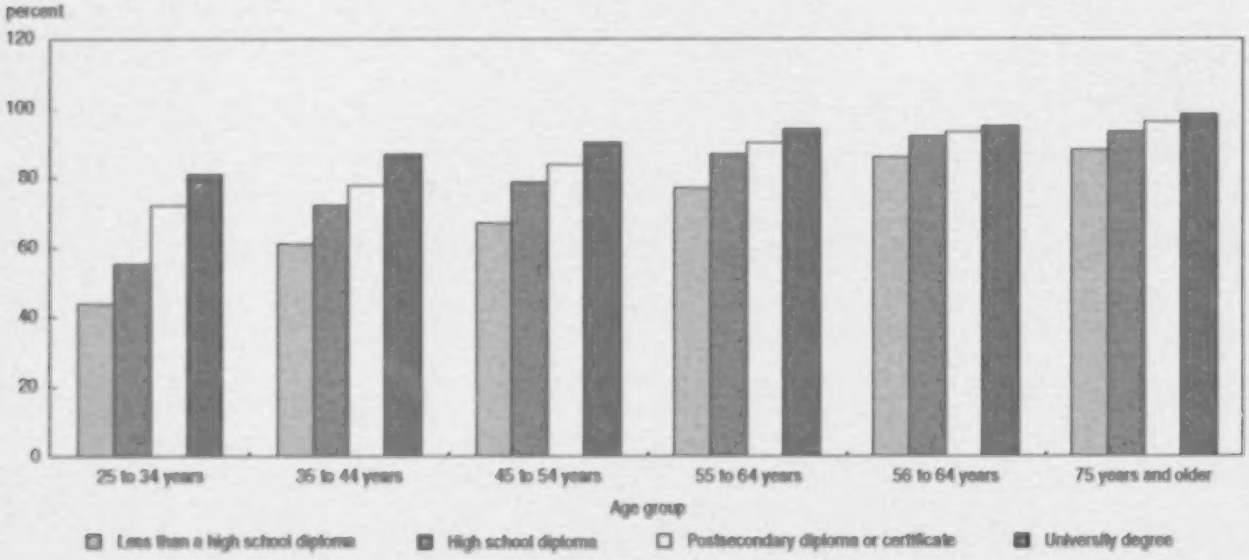
With regard to socioeconomic and demographic factors, age group is the factor with the greatest impact on voting. In 2013, for example, the proportion of young adults aged 25 to 34 who reported having voted in the last federal election was 70%, compared with 92% of seniors aged 75 and older (a difference of 22 percentage points).

By comparison, the difference in the voting rate between people without a high school diploma (77%) and university graduates (89%) was only 12 percentage points.

A link exists between age group and level of education. Among older Canadians aged 65 to 74, 86% of those who had not completed high school reported having voted in the last federal election, a proportion higher than for university graduates in the 25-to-34 age group (81%). Also, the difference in the voting rate of seniors who had graduated from university compared with those with less than a high school diploma was relatively low (a difference of 9 percentage points for those aged 65 to 74).

Among people aged 25 to 34, however, the voting rate was 44% for those without a high school diploma compared with 81% for university graduates, a difference of 37 percentage points (Chart 8).

Chart 8
People who voted in the last federal election, by age group and level of education, 2013



Source: Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey.

9. Only Aboriginal people living in the provinces are part of the General Social Survey.

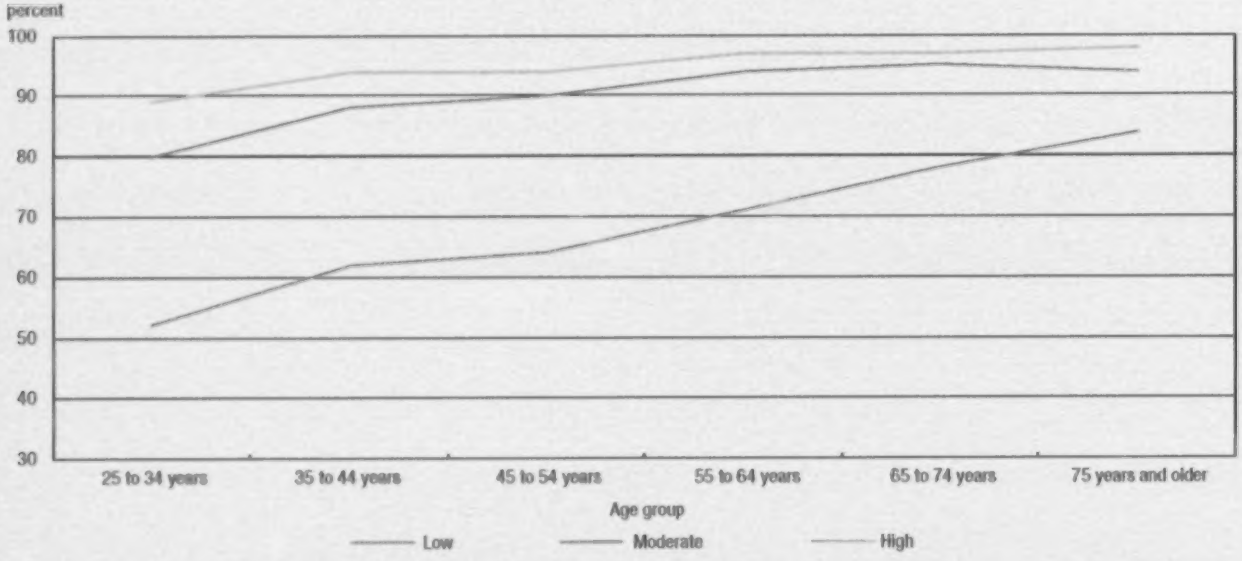
Interest in politics: A determining factor in voting

In addition to these well-known and documented variables, the data from the 2013 GSS on Social Identity can be used to explore the connections between voting and a variety of additional factors, such as interest in politics, the frequency with which people follow the news and current affairs, civic engagement, volunteering and sense of belonging to Canada.

Among those various indicators, interest in politics was the one with the strongest impact. For people who were very interested in politics, the probability of having voted was 30 percentage points higher than for people who were not very interested or not at all interested. That difference remained significant, at approximately 20 percentage points, when the other individual characteristics were kept constant in a regression model (Table 6).[10]

As was the case with level of education, the impact of interest in politics was more significant for young people than for older people. Among seniors aged 75 and older, the difference in voting rates between those who were very interested in politics and those who were not very or not at all interested was only 14 percentage points (respective rates of 98% and 84%). Among young adults aged 25 to 34, the difference was 37 percentage points (Chart 9).

Chart 9
People who voted in the last federal election, by age group and interest in politics, 2013



Source: Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey.

In other words, older Canadians tended to vote even if they were not very or not at all interested in politics, a situation that was less common among young adults. It is possible that the perception that voting is a civic duty, which is strongly tied to voting (Blais 2000), is more common among seniors.

Other factors associated with voting

People who followed the news and current affairs on a daily basis were also more likely to have voted in elections (88% compared with 63% of those who rarely or never did, representing a difference of 25 percentage points). However, that association could largely be accounted for by the characteristics of the people who followed current affairs on a daily basis, notably the fact that such individuals tended to be very interested in politics.

10. Predicted probabilities were calculated using logistic regression. All of the individual characteristics presented in the table were maintained at their average value in the model.

When individual characteristics associated with voting, including age group, level of education and interest in politics, were taken into account, the impact of following the news regularly greatly decreased (a difference of 5 percentage points compared with people who rarely or never followed the news and current affairs).

Similar conclusions can be drawn with regard to the impact of the other factors that were looked at, such as frequency of participation in group activities or meetings, volunteering, generalized trust and sense of belonging to Canada.

Those factors were all positively correlated with the probability of having voted in the last federal election; for example, people who showed civic engagement were more likely to vote. However, when all other individual characteristics were taken into account, the impact of each of them decreased significantly.

Reasons for not voting in the last federal election

Respondents who stated they had not voted in the most recent federal election were asked about their main reason for not voting. The reason given most often was not being interested (21%), followed by being too busy (10%) or not being informed on the issues (10%).

Men (11%) had a stronger tendency than women (8%) to report that they were too busy and that they felt that voting would not make a difference (9% compared with 5% of women).

Conversely, 13% of women reported that they had not voted because they were not informed on the issues; the corresponding proportion for men was 8%.

For young people in the 25-to-34 age group, 14% reported that the main reason they had not voted was that they were not informed on the issues. In comparison, this was true of 3% of people aged 55 and over who had not voted. A second reason given more often by young adults aged 25 to 34 was that they were too busy (11% compared with less than 5% of people aged 55 and over).

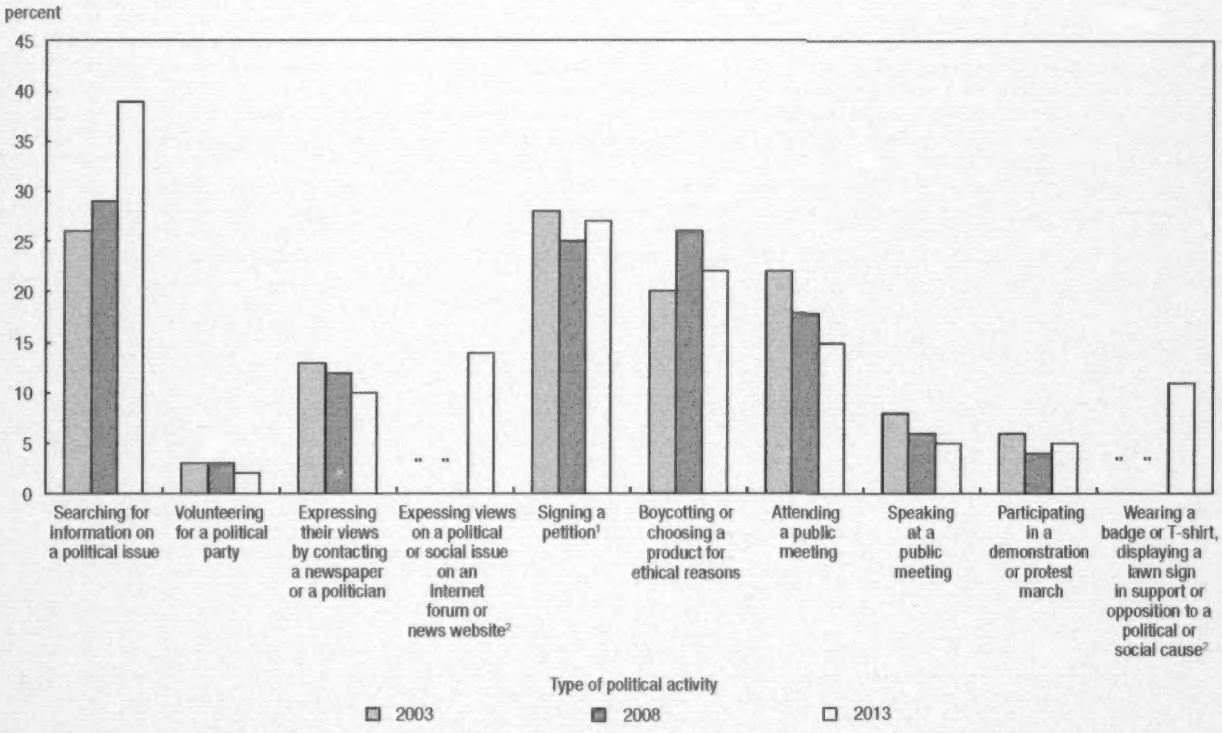
Conversely, older Canadians aged 55 and over who had not voted were more likely to state that illness or disability was the reason (9% compared with less than 2% of people in the 25-to-34 age group). Among people aged 75 and older who had not voted, the proportion was 20%.

More Canadians are searching information about politics

The amount and the diversity of political information available on the Internet have exploded over the past 10 years. Moreover, quickly finding information about a political issue has probably never been as easy for citizens.

In this context, it is not surprising to see that the proportion of Canadians who searched for information about a political issue increased significantly, from 26% in 2003 to 39% in 2013 (Chart 10).

Chart 10
Participation in political activities in the past 12 months, 2003, 2008 and 2013


percent
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Searching for information on a political issue
Volunteering for a political party
Expressing their views by contacting a newspaper or a politician
Expessing views on a political or social issue on an Internet forum or news website2
Signing a petition1
Boycotting or choosing a product for ethical reasons
Attending a public meeting
Speaking at a public meeting
Participating in a demonstration or protest march
Wearing a badge or T-shirt, displaying a lawn sign in support or opposition to a political or social cause2
Type of political activity
2003
2008
2013

.. not applicable for a specific reference period

1. In 2013, respondents were asked whether they had signed a petition on paper and one on the Internet (two separate questions). Previously, respondents were asked only whether they had signed a petition in the past 12 months.

2. Data not available for 2003 and 2008.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2003, 2008 and 2013 General Social Survey

The increase was especially pronounced among young adults aged 25 to 34: half of them (50%) had looked for information about a political issue in 2013, compared with 30% a decade earlier. A similar increase was recorded for the 15-to-24 age group (53% in 2013 compared with 36%). Young people aged 15 to 24 and those in the 25-to-34 age group were therefore – and by a wide margin – those with the strongest propensity to search for information about a political issue (Table 7). The intensive use of the Internet by young people, which makes this type of research easy, may be the reason behind this finding.

The rise in the tendency to search for information on a political issue was not accompanied, however, by an increase in political participation.

In fact, the only type of activity for which a slight increase in participation was recorded was boycotting or choosing a particular product for ethical reasons (22% in 2013 compared with 20% in 2003).

Instead, there appeared to be a downward trend for other forms of political activity for which information was collected in the GSS. For example, in 2013, 15% of Canadians reported having attended a public meeting, compared with 22% a decade earlier (Chart 10). Also, a lower proportion of people expressed their views on an issue by contacting a newspaper or a politician.

GSS respondents were also asked about two new types of political activity. In 2013, 12% of Canadians had expressed their views on a political or social issue on an Internet forum or news website, and 11% had worn a badge or T-shirt or displayed a lawn sign to support or oppose a political or social cause.

Women were less likely than men to attend a public meeting

While Canada had a number of female premiers in 2013, women remained under-represented among elected officials (Equal Voice 2015). How do men and women differ with respect to the various political activities in which citizens take part?

In general, women expressed a level of interest in politics that was somewhat lower than that of men (16% said they were very interested in politics compared with 24% of men).

Nevertheless, in many ways men and women displayed similar propensities for being politically active. In 2013, for example, women were just as likely as men to have voted in the last federal election, to have signed a petition or to have participated in a demonstration or march (Table 7).

However, women did differ from men in that they were less likely to have attended a public meeting (13% compared with 17% of men). Women were also less inclined to express their views on a political or social issue, whether by contacting a newspaper or a politician or on the Internet (Internet forum or news website).

Young people express their views on political and social issues on the Internet

Some authors maintain that the low level of voter turnout among youth should not be interpreted as a sign of apathy on their part; according to those authors, young people are inclined to become engaged in different ways, through activities that enable them to feel they are having a more direct impact on society (O'Neil 2007). The GSS data seem to support that opinion, at least in part.

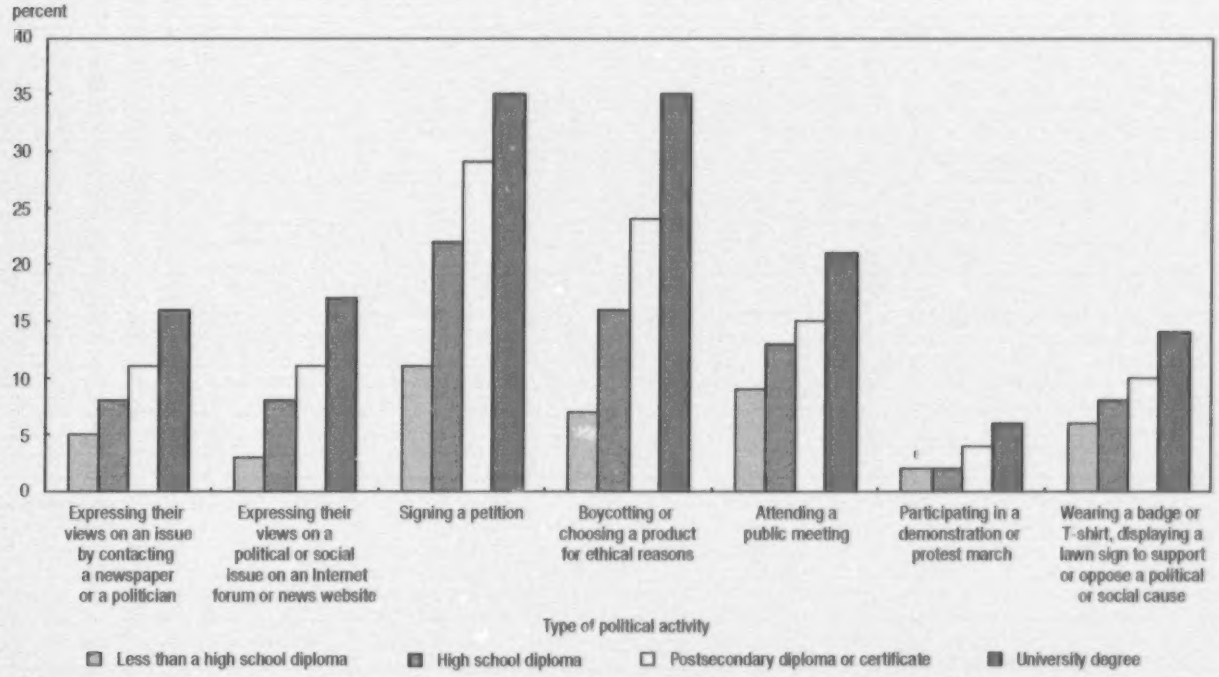
In 2013, young people aged 15 to 24 were approximately five times more likely to have participated in a demonstration or protest march compared with seniors aged 65 to 74. Moreover, while 17% of young people aged 15 to 24 had expressed their views on a political or social issue on the Internet, this was the case for 9% of people aged 45 years and over. Young people were more likely than seniors to sign a petition, wear a badge or T-shirt and display a lawn sign to support or oppose a particular political or social cause.

Education level and political activities other than voting

Previous studies have shown that, in addition to having a tendency to vote in larger numbers, those who are most economically and socially advantaged are much more likely to use the various ways of expressing their views in a democracy (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995).

The GSS data illustrate this reality for all types of political activities. For example, while 9% of people aged 25 and over who did not have a high school diploma attended a public meeting in 2013, this was the case for 21% of university graduates (Chart 11).

Chart 11
Participation of people 25 years and older in political activities in the past 12 months, by level of education, 2013


percent
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Expressing their views on an issue by contacting a newspaper or a politician
Expressing their views on a political or social issue on an Internet forum or news website
Signing a petition
Boycotting or choosing a product for ethical reasons
Attending a public meeting
Participating in a demonstration or protest march
Wearing a badge or T-shirt, displaying a lawn sign to support or oppose a political or social cause
Type of political activity
Less than a high school diploma
High school diploma
Postsecondary diploma or certificate
University degree

[E] use with caution
Source: Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey.

As well, university graduates were approximately three times more likely than people without a high school diploma to have expressed their views on an issue by contacting a newspaper or a politician (16% and 5% respectively).

Confidence in institutions and political participation

A number of political activities other than voting may be motivated by dissatisfaction with a particular situation. In 2013, for example, 10% of people who had no confidence in major corporations had participated in a demonstration or protest march, compared with 2% of those who did have confidence in such corporations (Table 8).

The same type of association existed with regard to confidence in the Canadian media: a low level of confidence was related to a higher probability of having expressed an opinion, signed a petition, boycotted or chosen a particular product for ethical reasons and so forth.

Conversely, a lower level of confidence in public institutions was associated with a lower probability of having voted. In 2013, for example, 71% of respondents who had no confidence in the Canadian media reported having voted in the last election, compared with 81% of those who had a higher level of confidence in the media.

Conclusion

Whether by participating in groups, voting or being politically active, Canadians are involved and are participating in their communities in different ways.

The level of civic engagement among Canadians was slightly higher in 2013 than it was a decade earlier. In fact, 65% of people aged 15 and over were members of a group, organization or association, compared with 61% in 2003. The types of groups most popular with Canadians were sports and recreational organizations, followed by unions or professional associations. Young people participated more often in sports organizations, while seniors were more inclined to be members of religious-affiliated groups and service clubs.

The voting rate has decreased significantly since the 1960s. In 2013, young voters, people with lower levels of education, people who were less interested in politics and who had lower levels of education and recent immigrants were less likely to have voted in the last federal election.

Among older Canadians, voter turnout was relatively high, even among those who expressed a low level of interest in politics and those with lower levels of education. Moreover, seniors who did not have a high school diploma were more likely to have voted in the federal election than people aged 25 to 34 with a university degree.

Between 2003 and 2013, Canadians' participation in political activities other than voting remained stable or decreased. However, more and more people searched for information on a political issue.

Age group was a factor that was strongly associated with political activities other than voting. Young people were more likely than seniors to have participated in a demonstration or protest march and to have supported or opposed a cause publicly.

Data sources and definitions

This report is based on the data from the 2003, 2008 and 2013 General Social Survey (GSS). The target population was composed of people aged 15 and over living in the 10 provinces of Canada, except for people living full time in institutions. The number of respondents was 24,951 in 2003, 20,401 in 2008 and 27,695 in 2013, for a total of 73,047 people.

For more information on data sources, please refer to the following documents:

2013 GSS on Social Identity:
http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SurvId=134876&InstaId=139605&SDDS=5024

2008 GSS on Social Networks:
http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SurvId=44601&InstaId=30687&SDDS=5024

2003 GSS on Social Engagement:
http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SurvId=1390&InstaId=5509&SDDS=5024

Data on volunteer rates come from the 2013 GSS on Giving, Volunteering and Participating:
http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=4430&lang=fr&db=imdb&adm=8&dis=2

Civic engagement

As part of the 2013 GSS, respondents were asked whether, in the past 12 months, they had been a member or participant in any of the following types of groups: 1) a union or professional association; 2) a political party or group; 3) a sports or recreational organization (such as a hockey league, health club or golf club); 4) a cultural, educational or hobby organization (such as a theatre group, book club or bridge club); 5) a religious-affiliated group (such as a church youth group or choir); 6) a school group or neighbourhood, civic or community association (such as PTA, alumni, block parents or neighbourhood watch); 7) a service club (such as Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus or the Legion); 8) a seniors' group (such as a seniors' club, recreational association or resource centre); 9) a youth organization (such as Scouts, Guides, Big Brothers, Big Sisters or the YWCA/YMCA); 10) an ethnic or immigrant association or club; 11) another type of organization.

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Table 1
Participation in groups, organizations or associations, 2003, 2008 and 2013

	Member of a group, organization or association (all types)			Union or professional association			Political party or group		
	2003	2008	2013	2003	2008	2013	2003	2008	2013
	percentage								
Total	61	60†	60†	25	20†	20†	5	5†	4
Men (ref.)	63	63*	60†	28	22†	19	6	7*	5
Women	59*	57**	60†	22*	17**	21**	4*	3**	4*
Age group									
15 to 24 years	64	68†	69†	16*	13*	11	4	6*	3
25 to 34 years	69*	64†	63**	25*	22**	22**	5	4*	5
35 to 44 years (ref.)	64	63*	60†	32	30*	31*	5	5*	5
45 to 54 years	64	63*	60†	35	40*	36	6*	6	6*
55 to 64 years	62*	60†	64**	26*	33**	30**	7*	6*	5**
65 to 74 years	50*	56*	62**	11*	15**	16**	4*	5**	3*
75 years and older	40*	52**	56**	6*	7	9**	4*	6**	3*

* significantly different from reference category (ref.) at $p < 0.05$
† significantly different from 2003 at $p < 0.05$
Sources: Civil Jobs Canada, 2003, 2008 and 2013 General Social Survey

Table 2
Participation in groups, organizations or associations, 2003, 2008 and 2013

	Sports or recreational organization (such as hockey league, health club or golf club)			Cultural, educational or hobby organization (such as literary group, book club or heritage club)		
	2003	2008	2013	2003	2008	2013
	percentage					
Total	29	29	31†	18	20†	20†
Men (ref.)	33	33	34	17	19†	18†
Women	25*	25*	28**	19*	21**	23**
Age group						
15 to 24 years	41*	43*	43*	19*	22**	20**
25 to 34 years	30*	30	33*	16	17*	17
35 to 44 years (ref.)	32	32	34	17	19†	19†
45 to 54 years	27*	29*	29*	19*	20	18
55 to 64 years	22*	23*	27**	21*	23*	23
65 to 74 years	21*	21*	24**	19*	22**	24**
75 years and older	12*	13*	16**	14*	17**	20*

* significantly different from reference category (ref.) at $p < 0.05$
† significantly different from 2003 at $p < 0.05$
Sources: Statistics Canada, 2003, 2008 and 2013 General Social Survey

Table 3
Participation in groups, organizations or associations, 2003, 2008 and 2013

	Religious-affiliated group (such as church youth group or choir)			School group, or neighbourhood, club or community association (such as PTA, alumni, Block Parents or Neighbourhood Watch)			Service club (such as Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus or the Legion)		
	2003	2008	2013	2003	2008	2013	2003	2008	2013
	percentage								
Total†	17	17	14*	17	21*	17	8	9*	6*
Men (ref.)	15	15	12*	15	18*	15	10	11*	7*
Women	19*	18*	16**	14*	23**	20**	6*	8**	6**
Age group									
15 to 24 years	14*	15	13	22	31**	23**	3*	6*	4
25 to 34 years	13*	13*	10**	14*	19**	17**	4*	6*	5*
35 to 44 years (ref.)	16	15	14*	21	24*	20	6	7	5*
45 to 54 years	18*	16	14*	16*	19**	16*	9*	10*	6**
55 to 64 years	20*	19*	15*	14*	17**	14*	12*	14*	8**
65 to 74 years	23*	22*	19**	12*	17**	14**	16*	17*	11**
75 years and older	21*	23*	22*	6*	10**	10**	14*	18**	11**

* significantly different from reference category (ref.) at $p < 0.05$
† significantly different from 2003 at $p < 0.05$
Sources: Statistics Canada, 2003, 2008 and 2013 General Social Survey

Table 4
Participation in groups, organizations or associations, people between 25 and 64 years, 2013

	Member of a group, organization or association	Union or professional association	Political party or group	Sports or recreational organization	Cultural, educational or hobby organization	Religion-affiliated group	Community organization	Service club	Ethnic or immigrant association or club
	percentage								
Highest level of education									
Less than high school diploma (ref.)	41	12	3*	13	9	9	8	4	3*
High school diploma	50*	21*	5	25*	13*	11	13*	6	4*
Postsecondary diploma or certificate	67*	33*	6*	31*	18*	13*	15*	6	5
University degree	79*	40*	8*	39*	25*	16*	23*	5	7*
Personal income									
Less than $40,000 (ref.)	55	20	5	22	16	13	17	5	5
$40,000 to $79,999	73*	43*	6	36*	19	13	16	6*	5
$80,000 or more	81*	53*	7*	40*	21*	14	20*	7*	5
Immigrant status									
Non-immigrant (ref.)	67	30	6	33	19	11	17	6	5
Established immigrant (immigrated before 2000)	62*	30*	6	25*	19	21*	16	7*	8*
Recent immigrant (immigrated between 2000 and 2013)	43*	26*	2**	19*	16	16*	17	3**	6*

... use with caution
* significantly different from reference category (ref.) at p < 0.05
Source: Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey

Table 5
Type of organization participants were most involved with and length of involvement, 2013

	Type of organization participants were most involved with			Length of involvement with organization
	All	15 to 64 years	65 years and over	Total
	percentage			average number of years
Total	100	100	100	10.0
Union or professional association	19	21	8	11.5
Political party or group	1	1	2	11.6
Sports or recreational organization	30	33	16	7.9
Cultural, educational or hobby organization	12	12	14	7.3
Religion-affiliated group	13	12	20	16.4
School group, or neighbourhood, civic or community association	9	10	7	5.0
Service club	5	5	6	11.7
Seniors' group	4	1	16	9.2
Youth organization	3	3	1	6.7
Ethnic or immigrant association or club	1	1	2	11.6
Other type of organization	4	4	5	6.7

Source: Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey

Table 6
Factors associated with the probability of having voted in the last federal election, people 25 years and older who were eligible to vote, 2013

	Voted federal election	
	percentage	predicted probability
Sex		
Men (ref.)	83	0.83
Women	83	0.83
Age group		
25 to 34 years	64*	0.73*
35 to 49 years (ref.)	76	0.82
50 to 64 years	83*	0.85
65 to 69 years	88*	0.87*
70 to 74 years	92*	0.91*
75 years and older	92*	0.91*
Highest level of education		
Less than high school diploma	71*	0.77*
High school diploma (ref.)	79	0.85
Postsecondary diploma or certificate	83*	0.87*
University diploma	86*	0.90*
Personal income		
Less than $20,000 (ref.)	79	0.85
$20,000 to $39,999	82*	0.86*
$40,000 to $79,999	87*	0.89
$80,000 or more	87*	0.90
Missing income value	82*	0.86
Homeowner		
No (ref.)	74	0.79
Yes	87*	0.90*
Married or common-law		
No (ref.)	77	0.83
Yes	87*	0.90*
Respondent's children under age five in household		
No (ref.)	83	0.85
Yes	84	0.89
Immigrant status		
Non-immigrant (ref.)	85	0.86
Established immigrant (immigrated before 2005)	85	0.89*
Recent immigrant (immigrated between 2005 and 2013)	71*	0.79*
Aboriginal identity		
No (ref.)	83	0.85
Yes	79*	0.79*
Province		
Newfoundland and Labrador	85	0.85
Prince Edward Island	87*	0.85
Nova Scotia	85	0.83
New Brunswick	87*	0.86*
Quebec	79*	0.80*
Ontario (ref.)	81	0.85
Manitoba	83	0.86
Saskatchewan	85	0.88
Alberta	83	0.85
British Columbia	81	0.83
Interest in politics		
Not very or not at all interested (ref.)	63	0.74
Somewhat interested	82*	0.86*
Very interested	92*	0.93*
Frequency of keeping up with news and current affairs		
Every day (ref.)	85	0.85
Several times a week	74*	0.82*
Several times a month	70*	0.83
Rarely or never	62*	0.80*
Frequency of participation in group activities or meetings		
No participation (ref.)	78	0.82
Less than once a month	83*	0.85
Once a month or more	87*	0.88

Table 6 (concluded)
Factors associated with the probability of having voted in the last federal election, people 25 years and older who were eligible to vote, 2013

	Declared participation in the federal general election	
	percentage	predicted probability
Volunteered in the past 12 months		
No (ref.)	45	0.00
Yes	60*	0.05*
Generalized trust: in general, most people can be trusted		
No (ref.)	75	0.00
Yes	87*	0.09*
Strong sense of belonging to Canada		
No (ref.)	76	0.00
Yes	82*	0.04*

† significantly different from reference category (ref.) (p < 0.05)
Source: Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey

Table 7
Participation in political activities during the past 12 months, 2013

	Getting in touch with the media	Contacting an elected official or a political party	Expressing views via a political or social issue on an Internet forum or online social media	Signing a petition	Boycotting a product for ethical reasons	Attending a public meeting	Participating in a demonstration or protest march	Wearing a badge or T-shirt, displaying a visible sign to support a cause or political or social claim
	percentage							
Total								
Men (ref.)	40	45	11	16	31	28	11	5
Women	41	52*	9*	19*	35	24*	10*	4
Age group								
15 to 19 years	34*	33*	5*	17*	31*	18*	11*	9*
20 to 24 years	33*	33*	5*	18*	32*	20*	12*	5
25 to 34 years	37*	40*	8	17*	32*	21*	9	5
35 to 44 years (ref.)	40	46	11	18	31	25	10	4
45 to 54 years	45*	52	12*	18	35	29	10	4
55 to 74 years	42*	54*	12*	18*	33	30*	10*	3*
75 years and older	32*	43*	10	7*	14*	9*	4*	1*

† significantly different from reference category (ref.) (p < 0.05)
Source: Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey

Table 8
Participation in political activities during the past 12 months, by level of confidence in Federal Parliament, media, major corporations and Canadian media, 2013

	Writing to federal politician	Approaching more or less by chance a federal politician or someone who works for one	Signing a petition or online petition	Boycotting or choosing products for ethical reasons	Attending a public meeting	Participating in a demonstration or protest march	Wearing a badge or T-shirt, displaying a bumper sticker or sign to support a cause, a political or social party
	percentage						
Confidence in ...							
Federal Parliament							
1 - No confidence at all (x=1)	15	16	40	31	40	12	8	15
2	21*	15	36	36	41	16	10	14
3	24*	17*	41*	34*	43*	18*	9	17
4	32*	21	41*	38*	48*	19*	9	20*
5 - A great deal of confidence	30*	21	38	41*	51*	19*	11	18
Media								
1 - No confidence at all (x=1)	15	16	35	30	39	16	11	17
2	21*	16	39	31	46	16	9	15
3	26*	17*	43*	41*	50*	19*	9	20*
4	32*	21*	47*	41*	51*	19*	9	19*
5 - A great deal of confidence	30*	21	39	44*	57*	21*	9	18
Major corporations								
1 - No confidence at all (x=1)	16	16	35	31	40	16	10	16
2	21*	17*	39	36*	45*	17	11	15
3	26*	18*	44*	41*	50*	18*	9	19*
4	32*	21*	46*	43*	51*	19*	9	20*
5 - A great deal of confidence	31*	21*	41*	47*	57*	21*	11	21*
Canadian media								
1 - No confidence at all (x=1)	15	16	35	30	39	15	9	15
2	19*	17*	41*	36*	46*	16*	9	17*
3	25*	19*	47*	39*	49*	18*	11	21*
4	32*	19*	47*	41*	51*	19*	9	19*
5 - A great deal of confidence	31*	21*	41*	44*	54*	21*	11	20*

[1] 95% CI [2]
* significantly different from reference category (p < 0.05)
Notes: Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey